

Programs of Growth:

Moving toward the first milestone and “the multiplicity of ways in which it can be reached”

Over the past year the believers have been earnestly studying the 28 December 2010 message from the Universal House of Justice and acting on its guidance according to the circumstances in their clusters. Already, inspiring stories abound as to how the friends “under a wide diversity of conditions” are striving to nurture a nascent program of growth in their clusters and are experiencing firsthand its “fundamentally organic nature.”

In this edition of the newsletter, the accounts from strikingly different social realities present a picture of how the friends are taking advantage of “opportunities afforded by [their] personal circumstances” and reaching out to those “eager to improve material and spiritual conditions” in their communities. Although the stories illustrate the different ways the process of growth was initiated and is unfolding in these clusters, they also hold in common a critical element—they underscore the observation of the House of Justice that the friends are growing in their capacity “to enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import with people from every walk of life.”

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***Initiating a Program of Growth with the Aid of Homefront Pioneers:** The strategic placement of pioneers, often coming from advanced clusters, who are experienced in the institute process, represents one of the ways to stimulate a process of growth in an emerging cluster.*

United States

An Auxiliary Board member encouraged two assistants to move as pioneers to a cluster to help initiate a growth process and move it along the continuum toward the first milestone. They found that small-town life offered unexpected possibilities once they reached out to others.

Having recently moved to a small town in **Colorado** with very few African Americans, we were unsure about how we would be accepted, and we reluctantly ventured out to eat or shop in town, preferring to frequent places in the larger town that was six miles away. One morning, we decided: ENOUGH isolating! It was time for us to let go of these self-inflicted limitations and get to know people in the community.

We decided to start by going to the local Farmer’s Market and afterwards, decided to run a couple of errands while in town. On my way to meet the other pioneer at a computer repair shop, I noticed a car with the logo of the shop and a “Coexist Religions” bumper sticker. In the shop, I spoke to the car’s owner and told her about the interfaith devotional meetings we were planning. She said that she would like information about the date and time when we started them.

We then saw a health center and decided to check it out. We met a wonderful woman who said she had been ill for several days and during her meditation and prayer asked for a spiritual gathering to attend. It turns out that she had a roommate in college who was a Bahá’í! She is very interested in coming and invited us to a Japanese tea ceremony at her home. She and a colleague invited us to lunch and introduced us to a number of people as we walked the couple of blocks to the cafe. As my Bahá’í partner was talking about

the Bahá'í Faith with a man who had joined us, the colleague said, "I have been studying the Bhagavad Gita and I believe the same things he's saying. Can I come to the gathering?" What confirmations!

We held our first devotional meeting and had two seekers, and a Bahá'í from another community joined us. The two seekers suggested others that might be interested and invited us to an open house at a local coffee shop the next evening. Of course, we went! Our host introduced us to almost everyone in the shop and invited them to our devotions. She had been so touched by the reading of "Blessed Is the Spot" that had ended our gathering on the previous evening that she began to recite what she recalled to others. We surprised her with a framed copy of "Blessed Is the Spot" and she read it aloud to those nearby.

Wonderful connections continued! I was explaining a little more detail to a woman in the coffee shop about the devotions and she remarked, "That sounds Bahá'í." We were astonished, to say the least! It turns out that she was a hairdresser who had lived in Colorado Springs about five years ago and had received Bahá'í material from one of her clients. She was overjoyed at meeting us and said that she still has the prayers and thought that she'd never meet Bahá'ís again since moving to this small town. We told her about our devotionals and agreed to meet to have a conversation about the Bahá'í Faith.

The spiritual connections continued to accelerate at a phenomenal speed! We literally walked away with "chills" after our next visit to the Farmer's Market. A woman approached us and said that she knew all about us. She said she saw us the first week at the market and wondered who these two were who seemed to be "walking on air." She said she would like to come to our gatherings (before we even mentioned them).

Our second devotional gathering expanded to three seekers and our third to four seekers. I just received a call from one of the seekers that she will be bringing another friend to next week's devotions. It is great to have seekers who are so excited that they are reaching out to other receptive souls in town! So much interest has been expressed in the devotional gatherings about learning more about the Bahá'í Faith that we have given out Bahá'í literature and set aside alternate Thursday evenings for those who want to learn more. We plan to begin with a fireside and then offer a Book 1 study circle.

We are beginning to get a glimpse of the power of spiritual relationships and the significance of conversations of spiritual import in building a community.

In describing how a program of growth emerges, the House of Justice mentions that "visiting teams may be called upon to provide impetus to the fledgling set of activities." Once homefront pioneers have developed relationships with the local people and a few activities are under way, a team of friends from nearby can provide welcome support and encouragement.

India

An Auxiliary Board member reports on how the friends in an advanced cluster are assisting a neighboring cluster in efforts to initiate a program of growth and pass the first milestone.

It was decided in our reflection meeting in **Nashik** that a team would visit the **Surgana** cluster to assist the two dedicated young men who had pioneered there about three

months ago. We formed a team of five—three men and two women—and headed to Surgana so that we could help with home visits that evening.

We had a wonderful discussion with the pioneers about the current activities, the vision presented in the 28 December message, and how to pursue it. I felt that these two souls had come a long way over the past three months of pioneering in that they had attained such clarity in their thinking. They also expressed love for their pioneering post and for the people, and one pioneer said, “I would not mind my bones being buried here.”

We made a plan for the home visits and teaching and headed out to visit families in Surgana proper. All together we made six home visits, and the families were all large, educated, and very receptive to the Faith. I am sure that in the near future they will play a great part in building this community. They love the pioneers, which shows that the youth have been serving in the right way, and soon they will surely join the endeavors of the Faith.

We then visited a village in the cluster, Wadpara, where a Bahá'í family lives. In the village some youth had participated in an institute campaign and completed Books 1 to 3. They knew we were coming and were eagerly waiting for us. Of the 14 participants in the campaign, two were junior youth and the rest above 15. Since there was no electricity, we sat in the dim light of kerosene lamps, but could clearly see the light of faith in their eyes. One of the pioneers said it was time for prayers. It was unbelievable how many prayers, in six different languages, were chanted without a moment's hesitation, one after the other! It brought tears of joy to our eyes to see these youths so joyful and reciting prayers, some long and difficult, with reverence. It was an amazing experience and we were reminded of what the House of Justice has written about the potential existing in villages.

I then asked one of the pioneers if he had thought of asking these young people to join the Faith and become part of this great work we're doing. He said that he hadn't, so I asked if he wanted to do it tonight because by coincidence I had many declaration cards with me. After some discussion, 12 of the youths happily declared their faith. All of them are going to join the next institute campaign to continue with the sequence of courses.

This cluster has great potential. I know that the feet of “many great teachers” have trodden in this area, but I feel sure that the systematic growth that is happening now is thanks to the sincere and systematic efforts of the homefront pioneers and also the support from the friends from Nashik.

Initiating a Program of Growth in a Cluster Where a Few Bahá'ís Already Reside: *In many clusters identified for programs of growth, a few Bahá'ís may live there, but the activity has been limited and the institute process has not taken root. A number of stories from different parts of the world describe the enthusiastic response members of institutions receive when they visit such communities and share with the friends a vision of growth that can unfold in their clusters.*

Venezuela

The Counsellor reports that the visits to the friends who live in clusters where efforts are being made to establish new programs of growth are “bringing great joy to all.” “I feel this is a time to harvest what was planted by devoted teachers some years ago.” She shares a story from an assistant to an Auxiliary Board member about a fruitful visit to a cluster in western

Venezuela. The planning for the visits to goal clusters had been done at a gathering held for assistants to the Board members.

At our first visit to **Villa del Rosario** in September, we arrived at the home of a Bahá'í family at 11 a.m. It is difficult to describe the joy generated by the visit. We spoke about the activities that were taking place in the region and remembered stories and individuals who had left their mark in this beautiful cluster. We also studied the message from the Universal House of Justice dated 1 January 2011, which helped focus all the attention on the importance of resuming activities.

During our consultation, it was voiced that no visits or activities had been carried out in this cluster for approximately 18 months. The friends said that they would like to continue the sequence of institute courses. They had studied up to Book 3 a long time ago, so we agreed to schedule a refresher course on Book 1 for two days in early October. During those days, we also visited the friends who had at one time taken part in activities to share deepening themes with them and invite them to continue with the institute courses and participate in consultations on developing a program of growth.

The Bahá'í family we had visited in September had already offered to host a weekly devotional gathering in their home to which they would invite several friends from the community. We wish we could describe, without the limitation of words, the love and enthusiasm this family showered on us for contacting them and encouraging them to resume their activities and serve their community.

In some clusters a nascent program of growth can be fostered through the efforts of one Bahá'í family that is inspired by the vision of growth and encouraged to take advantage of "opportunities afforded by [their] personal circumstances."

Belarus

A Counsellor shares the story of a family who live in a cluster that did not receive priority attention in the past five years but who have now become "ignited" and "focused on the vision of the Plan." She writes that even their 10-year-old daughter is an active worker: "She invites other children to Bahá'í classes and sometimes explains what the class is about to their parents."

This family lives in a very promising neighborhood in **Brest**. In it, there is a big yard with a playground around which are several big apartment buildings, a school with a stadium, and a college dormitory. After having hosted regular devotional meetings for a while and having tried to gather children from Bahá'í families for a children's class, the wife decided to start a class with her own two children while actively looking for contacts to teach the Faith. She found a seeker who joined a Book 1 study circle and at the same time brought her child to the children's class. This seeker is now teaching the Faith and has participated in a reflection meeting.

As key resources in a goal cluster, this family was invited to participate in the regional institutional meeting in Moldova. Galvanized by this experience, they decided to hold activities for children in the yard, and made contact with many more children in the area. They now have nine children regularly attending their class.

Some of the youngsters they contacted through these activities are junior youth, and they see even greater potential for junior youth groups. The husband was very much willing to be trained to become an animator; since that time of life was very hard for him, he feels

like he understands junior youth very well. There was a plan that they would go to the Book 5 course in Moldova in July. However, they felt they could not wait that long, as an initial relationship with the young people was already started, and they wanted to follow up on that quickly so that they could form a junior youth group in that neighborhood in a few weeks. Thus a plan was made during the meeting for them to go through Book 5 at an intensive pace. The Auxiliary Board member was invited to spend two weeks in Brest to tutor the Book 5 study circle, to help form the junior youth group, and accompany this family and other friends in the cluster in their teaching efforts.

The Counsellor writes: “I feel there is enormous potential in that family and that neighborhood. The wife seeks and uses all opportunities with agility, enthusiasm, and a positive spirit.”

In highly receptive areas, a teaching campaign followed by intensive institute courses can lay a foundation for a program of growth on which the local Bahá'ís may build.

Mozambique

In the last week of July, a historic event took place in the **Dondo** cluster. A meeting brought together the core group of Mozambique to consult on the way forward in implementing the current Plan and to recapture the spirit of teaching in Mozambique. The program began with the arrival of 37 friends from the Maputo, Quelimane, Xai-Xai, Chimoio, Dondo, and Beira Clusters in Mozambique, two friends from Angola, and four pioneers—two from Spain and two from Zimbabwe. For these latter two friends who had arrived recently, this gathering helped them connect with the believers in Mozambique, including those from the Province of Manica where they will reside.

The Auxiliary Board member was very active in preparing for the teaching project and participated in it for a few days. The first two days were dedicated to studying guidance from the Universal House of Justice and the introduction to the Faith from Book 6.

On the first day of the teaching project, 46 individuals declared. At the end of the day, the friends reflected on whether to continue their teaching efforts or to stop in order to start the consolidation process, as their goal had already been surpassed. Although everyone agreed it was time to start the process of consolidation, they decided to carry on with the second day of teaching, but in order not to outstrip the human resources in Dondo, the teams would only go back to teach in the homes they had promised to revisit. On this day, 21 new souls declared and a few more core activities were started. Before undertaking consolidation activities, it was suggested that all the new Bahá'ís be brought together so that we could meet and get to know one another as fellow believers. This happened as planned, and 40 out of the 67 new believers were present at the meeting. A number of them already knew each other from the neighborhood and were pleasantly surprised to meet each other as fellow Bahá'ís. Three study circles, four children's classes, and one junior youth group got under way!

The following day, a refresher course for tutors, children's class teachers, and junior youth animators was organized in order to intensify the activities that were starting up in Dondo. Also invited to this refresher were those from other clusters, so that they could start programs of growth in their areas. A Nineteen Day Feast was organized at the home of one of the new believers, and all the new friends were invited to attend. Later, participants from each cluster met and made plans for what they were going to do when they returned to their own clusters in order to establish programs of growth.

It was amazing to see from their plans how focused the friends were after studying the guidance and participating in a teaching project, most of them for the very first time. For many of the friends gathered, it was also the first time that they heard about the messages from the House of Justice or understood about institutions and agencies in Mozambique.

From this experience, we know that from the combination of a highly receptive population with multitudes yearning to join the fold of the followers of the Blessed Beauty, and the huge enthusiasm generated among the participants in this teaching campaign, great and wonderful things can be realized in Mozambique and that the results will come with hard work and confirmations from Bahá'u'lláh.

Initiating a Program of Growth—Any Core Activity “Can Serve As a Stimulus to Growth”: *In clusters where the believers are striving to set in motion programs of growth by reaching out to neighbors and other friends, they are receiving confirmations of how readily the core activities create a pattern of activity conducive to growth.*

Canada

A believer from **Port Alberni**, a cluster in British Columbia, Canada, tells how this small cluster has gone from sporadic attempts to engage others in the processes of growth to a systematic approach that is bearing fruit.

I recently married and moved from a cluster with an intensive program of growth to one that has not yet reached the first milestone. I had been a member of the cluster agencies in my previous cluster. My new husband had been thinking of starting a ***children’s class*** in his neighborhood but felt, as a single man, he would be in an awkward position to approach the neighbors. He prayed for a partner to help him; yet, little did he know that the partner would be in the form of a wife! Anyway, a few weeks after the wedding and the move, we consulted together, made brochures, and planned the children’s class. We both had experience as children’s class teachers in the past. We approached neighbors and colleagues and now have a weekly class with four children and three parents who come each week. Our aim is to begin a Book 1 with the parents. We’ve already talked to them a bit about the purpose of the core activities, and all three adults seem quite receptive to the Faith.

Shortly after my marriage and move to the new cluster, our Auxiliary Board member emailed me and suggested names of two friends who might wish to form a team with me. She suggested we study some guidance, set goals, and then reflect every week on how it went. I contacted those people and we are now meeting regularly, setting goals for personal teaching, and already we’re seeing results—one Book 1 has reformed, another Book 1 looks likely to start soon, and a Book 4 is also starting. It is amazing what can happen when only two or three people study the guidance, consult, act, and reflect together in a consistent, purposeful way. The guidance from the 28 December 2010 letter of the Universal House of Justice has been particularly inspiring.

In addition to becoming more systematic in their approach, the friends in goal clusters are learning from others who gained useful experience during the last Plan.

United States

A Counsellor reported on a meeting of community members from three semirural clusters near **St. Louis**, Missouri, who gathered to discuss how they could make efforts in this Five Year

Plan to set in motion programs of growth. The conversation opened by reading the 1 January 2011 message, reflecting on it through the lens of their own particular cluster, and commenting on what had been learned and accomplished in the previous Plan.

The friends from one of the clusters, in particular, had made steady efforts in the last Plan and have seen an initial movement within the local population. They shared the story of how their efforts began a few years ago, when a married couple from the cluster participated in an institute campaign in St. Louis. They returned to their home community and invited others to begin studying courses of the training institute together. As these few friends progressed through the sequence of courses, they were encouraged by the example and spirit of their tutors and found themselves seizing more opportunities to share the Bahá'í Faith with others and engage in deeper conversations.

A *devotional meeting* provided an initial stimulus to movement. Gradually, a study circle was formed with some of the participants from the devotional gathering. After some months, the friends began a children's class and involved local residents as teachers. The class has been sustained for two years, and friends of the Faith who are teachers of the children's classes reflect together regularly with the parents. A junior youth group and second children's class began in the last two cycles. Whole families are discussing the Bahá'í teachings and praying together. These steady efforts have continued with occasional visits from an Auxiliary Board member and assistant, and a member of the Regional Bahá'í Council who lives nearby. When they visit, they join the local Bahá'ís in their teaching efforts—from home visits to firesides—or participate in the study circles.

Friends from the other two semirural clusters who are more at the beginning of the process shared some of their experiences and challenges and asked questions. “Weren't you discouraged by how few of you there were at first?” “How did your Local Assembly make changes in the way they administered to the community?” Responding to these questions, the friends described how they tried to be patient, to keep making efforts, to deepen friendships with individuals, and to draw more people into the activities. The spirit of optimism, faith in the growing capacity of new collaborators, as well as the example of reliance on prayer inspired everyone. When the group considered what the fruit of five more years of effort could be, with more and more people contributing, in the many small towns and villages in these clusters, the room became silent. There was an awareness of the sacredness of this process, and how more and more places are being touched by the light of the Love of God.

Taiwan

Although this homefront pioneer relates an experience that began in the previous Plan, it offers insight into how the growth process unfolded over a two-year period in a nearly virgin cluster and how the pioneer understood well the dynamics of capacity building.

It all happened about two years ago when my whole family moved to Taiwan's second largest city, Kao-hsiung, as homefront pioneers. Although it's only an hour away by high speed rail from my hometown, it is an area that is strange for me because of the cultural and language differences from my part of Taiwan. As soon as we arrived in Kao-hsiung, we started by visiting the list of Bahá'ís provided to us by the National Spiritual Assembly. We met two Bahá'ís who had completed some institute courses a long time ago, and they showed interest in activities. Thus we decided that we needed to start anew.

As soon as we realized that the cultural environment was different in Kao-hsiung, we did not hurry to teach the Faith but tried to learn and understand the local culture. We went to the parks and to groups or associations to listen to what they were saying and how they do things. Then we decided we should integrate into the culture and provide services in order to win the trust of the local people.

We volunteered to be committee members in the apartment building where we lived. This is a volunteer service but it gave us easy access to meet all the tenants in the building. After three months, we discussed with the committee that we were going to hold a gathering to introduce the idea of Bahá'í study circles for all the tenants. Only two of our neighbors turned up for the meeting, and even though they expressed interest in the course, they said that they had no time. We did not feel discouraged, and we prayed for God's assistance. In a few days, one of the neighbors called to tell us that in the school where she worked, there would be a meeting of the school volunteers, and she invited me to come to introduce our courses. After the presentation, most of the mothers did not respond, but I noticed there were two mothers who seemed interested. I told them, "If you would like to have this course, try to find a few more friends to form a study circle. And if you do not know how to introduce the course to your friends, that's okay; you only need to bring them together and I'll give the presentation." In that way, our **study circle** was formed.

This process allowed us to understand that because of the alienation between people that exists in cities, in order to teach we need to spend time to win the trust of people. If we rely on looking for people to teach, it not only takes time but also it's limited. But if we do it through each participant who comes to a study circle, then the possibility is limitless because every participant has a group. They know each other well and already have trust. Also, they can accompany each other easily and consolidation becomes more effective. So, whenever they come to study, from the first day we prepare them to become teachers of the Faith, and their own transformation is the most important element for the success of teaching.

Important to developing this cluster was the study of the messages from the House of Justice, especially the 28 December 2010 message. When I read, "one or two hundred are facilitating the participation of one or two thousand," I realized that the development of the community cannot depend on our family alone. So, whenever I perform any kind of service, I always take into consideration who will assume the task the next time. I try to look at the services needed and divide them into many smaller ones and then select friends to carry them out and nurture them until they can work independently. In this way, every person has the bounty to serve the Faith and receive divine confirmation for themselves.

By the end of the two years, this cluster had not only passed the first milestone but had passed the second milestone with tens of new believers, a Local Spiritual Assembly, Nineteen Day Feasts and Holy Days, and reflection gatherings.